DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 616 TM 010 018

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TITLE Implications of Minimum-Competency Testing for Minority Students.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation, Princeton, N.J.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Dec 79
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education (San Francisco, CA, April 11, 1979); For related documents, see TM 010 017-020
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ 08541 ($2.00 while supplies last)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Standards; *Black Attitudes; *Evaluation Needs; Graduation Requirements; Legal Problems; *Minimum Competency Testing; Minority Groups; Negative Attitudes; *Public Opinion; Racial Differences; School Districts; Secondary Education; State Programs; Test Bias; *Testing Problems; Testing Programs; Test Results
IDENTIFIERS Information Analysis Products

ABSTRACT

Most of the arguments lodged against minimum competency testing are really observations about the abuses of testing. Blacks and other minority groups are understandably mistrustful of recent developments in minimum competency testing--possible grounds for legal challenges include the adequacy of the phase-in periods; the match between tests and instruction; past and subsequent discriminatory practices; and the rationale for setting standards. Problems have been evident in New York City, Virginia, Florida, and North Carolina. Despite these reservations, Americans of all races who were polled about their educational attitudes favored minimum competency testing; 90% favored standards for grade promotion and high school graduation, and 80% favored prompt remedial instruction for students failing competency tests. The American public, and particularly blacks, indicated low levels of confidence in the quality of public school education. There is evidence, however, that testing programs have shown gains in student achievement in Anacostia (District of Columbia); Greensville County, Virginia; Denver, Colorado; Gary, Indiana; and Detroit, Michigan. Minimum competency standards constitute a guarantee never before asked of public schools--that no child will leave school as a functional illiterate. This is why minorities can, and do, support the competency testing movement. (GDC)

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IMPLICATIONS OF MINIMUM-COMPETENCY TESTING FOR MINORITY STUDENTS

by

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TM010 018

The material in this publication was prepared pursuant to a contract with the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to qualified professionals for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either these reviewers or the National Institute of Education.

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December 1979

Preface

To address questions concerning the implications for minority groups of the movement toward minimum competency testing, Robert A. Feldmesser, a senior research sociologist at Educational Testing Service, organized a symposium at the 1979 meeting of the National Council of Measurement in Education. In recognition of the significance of the issue, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation encouraged and supported Dr. Feldmesser's efforts and agreed to publish the papers presented in order to bring them to the attention of a wide audience.

The following paper was one of those presented at the symposium. We hope that its appearance in print will sensitize the educational community and the general public to the issues involved and will stimulate discussion and a search for satisfactory solutions.

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Associate Director, ERIC/TM

Implications of Minimum-Competency Testing for Minority Students

A. Graham Down

The Need for MCT

Minimum-competency testing (MCT) offers more hope than any development in public school policy since the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education for realizing the educational aspirations of minority students and parents. This is so because MCT is a means of specifying dramatically that some children are not learning, of discovering what remedial help they need, of guiding curriculum revision, and of providing new benchmarks for judging how well public schools are performing.

Having set forth so sweeping a thesis, let me add that I'm not unmindful of the public debate now raging on the merits of MCT. In the disorderly rhetoric of that debate, it is often difficult to sort out the pros and cons. But a careful listener notices that most of the arguments lodged against MCT are really observations about the abuses of testing. Such comments are quite appropriate, to be sure. But the critics of MCT are not able to show that such misuses are inherent in it. Indeed, there is probably good reason to expect that the imposition of minimum standards for all children and the accompanying public interest and publicity will do a great deal toward eliminating abuses in testing. Such optimism is grounded in the spreading awareness that we can and must do better on three fronts:

1. The public has to learn more about testing in order to supply informed criticism.

2. The research and development community needs to educate its several publics about testing. This symposium and other activities in APA and AERA, for example, illustrate the heightened consciousness of a public duty to insure the proper use of testing.

3. Schools must make certain that they are skilled in using testing by demanding adequate preservice and inservice training for everyone involved in tests and measurement.

What I'm saying is that we should beware of bickering over testing in general while we are trying to discuss the implications of a particular kind of testing program for a particular group--minorities.

There need be no debate about what minimum-competency tests are revealing about the extent of our inability to educate all of our children, especially minority children. In New York City, the highly publicized forecast is that as many as 7,000 of the city's 60,000 seniors will fail to qualify for diplomas this June as a result of not passing a statewide test in basic skills that has been widely condemned as ridiculously easy. Observers expect the majority of affected students will be black or hispanic.

In the new Virginia statewide minimum competency testing program, results are equally discouraging, and the statistics are more explicit. In the fall of 1978, some 70,000 Virginia tenth-graders were given a 160-item test of reading and mathematics. Overall, 18 percent failed to achieve the minimum required passing score. That is to say, 12,000 Virginia tenth-graders were found incapable of reading or doing numbers at a minimal level of acceptability. The failure rate for black students was nearly four times that of whites and was double the failure rate experienced by other minorities, mainly Asians. The disparities were not identical for both reading and mathematics, but in general the achievement gap is disheartening, even tragic. In making public the statistics, Virginia officials were careful to point out that all of the test items had been reviewed by minority panels in order to eliminate any questions having racial or cultural bias. The students will receive remedial work and three more chances to pass the test. Educators expect that no more than five percent of this year's tenth-graders will be denied diplomas at the end of their senior year of June, 1981.

Concerns about MCT

In the light of early returns from MCT programs and all that has happened in public schools in the last 25 years, it is not hard to understand why black people and members of other minority groups may not trust MCT. The Reverend Jesse Jackson speaks pointedly of the so-called literacy tests in the south, which had nothing to do with improving the literacy of blacks. Their only effect was to disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of black citizens. Jackson also reminds us that, in many cases, the official managers of today's school desegregation are the perpetrators of yesterday's segregation. No wonder that blacks are at least suspicious of whites' motives.

Deep-running as the fears often are, the NAACP Legal and Educational Defense Fund has not been reticent about issuing legal challenges to MCT when it has appeared to be unlawfully discriminatory. Such is the Fund's view in Florida and North Carolina, where court tests have begun. In the latter, the complaint has been filed in behalf of one Bobby Nathaniel Green and all eleventh- and twelfth-graders in North Carolina who are black, poor white, or American Indian. The Florida case is known as Debra P. v. Turlington. Defense Fund officials have said that they are also considering legal actions elsewhere, particularly in New York City, where a Puerto Rican activist group has already filed a civil rights complaint aimed at blocking the high school graduation test.

As Merle McClung (17) has pointed out, the grounds for possible legal warfare are many, including:

1. the adequacy of the phase-in period;

2. the match between tests and instruction--i.e., whether the tests cover material that is explicitly in the curriculum and is also actually taught in the classroom;

3. discrimination, including both past discrimination dating to years before the new tests, and subsequent discrimination as part of any segregation or tracking that may result from remediation efforts;

4. the rationale for setting minimum standards.

Commenting on New York City's lurching progress toward setting minimum standards for high school graduation, the president of the school board in a neighboring suburb that is under the same Regents' mandate wrote in The New York Times recently that the Regents' competency tests "show that the Regents have neither defined clearly what it is they want students to be competent for, nor considered seriously the several questions that the new competency standards raise." One such question touches on virtually every legal issue raised by McClung, in the opinion of this suburban school board president:

> Not only are the Regents changing the rules, but they are holding accountable only those playing by the old rules: the students. And, although accountability is a much-used word whenever competency testing is mentioned, to date there has been no genuine discussion of who, besides the students themselves, shall be held accountable for those who fail the exam.

Americans Want

Despite such persistent and perhaps justifiable reservations, recent Gallup Polls of attitudes toward education give persuasive evidence that Americans--including minorities--want minimum competency testing programs. As might be expected, there is nearly universal agreement that the traditional three R's should constitute the core of required learning; Gallup Polls indicate that roughly 90 percent of all races favor establishing minimum standards for grade-to-grade promotion as well as for high school graduation. People are evenly divided as to who should be responsible for developing tests for the purpose of determining the achievement of minimum competency, with approximately one-third of Americans favoring each of three possibilities--local schools, state departments of education, and the federal government. But 80 percent of Americans are certain that children who fail to meet minimum-competency standards should be given prompt and ample remedial education.

One measure of people's wavering faith in their public schools is that two-thirds of them believe that reported declines in test scores are a sign of declining quality of education, and there is no discrepancy among races in this opinion. On the other hand, blacks generally--but especially those in the north--give much worse marks to the public schools than do people at large. For example, the Gallup Polls from 1974-1978 show that the proportion of Americans giving high ratings to the public schools dropped from 48 percent to 36 percent, while the proportion of people giving very low marks to the schools rose from 11 percent to 19 percent. Black Americans living in northern states exhibit these same trends but evidently feel more intensely about the problems

of the schools, because only 27 percent of them gave high marks to the schools in 1978 and 43 percent gave low marks, a resounding vote of no confidence. This same group of Americans--blacks living in northern states--believe strongly that minority students do not have equal educational opportunities in the public schools: two-thirds of them hold this view.

The conclusions I draw from the Gallup Polls of attitudes toward education are:

1. There is a core of cognitive learning on which nearly all Americans agree the schools should place primary emphasis and should be expected to attain some standard of success

2. Testing offers a way to measure the effectiveness of the schools and to establish minimum standards of teaching and learning

3. Public confidence in the schools badly requires bolstering, especially among minorities.

As further illustration, let me cite what has happened in Anacostia, an area of Washington, D.C. with a large minority population. In July 1977, the District of Columbia school board voted unanimously to establish minimum achievement standards for promotion and graduation. Today, nearly two years later, no district-wide regulations have been issued to implement that decision. Last fall, tired of waiting for the central administration to act, the people of Anacostia decided to take the matter into their own hands. The 31 schools in the area established their own MCT program, effective in the spring of 1979. The program was developed by local school principals and an elected advisory board comprised mainly of neighborhood parents. Their decision was to set the standards low initially with the expectation of raising them gradually as they gathered experience with the new program.

Are these parents grasping for a brass ring that will forever prove beyond their reach? The answer is emphatically NO. Evidence is beginning to mount that properly managed MCT programs work--that is, they help to improve achievement. Perhaps the most widely known proof comes from the rural community of Greensville County, Virginia, where school superintendent Sam Owen six years ago decided to establish minimum standards for grade-to-grade promotion and for graduation from high school. This is a south-central Virginia county where the population is 54 percent black and where the annual per-pupil expenditures for schools amount to $900, roughly half of what is spent in many places.

Superintendent Owen announced the new MCT program in the fall of 1973 using a test developed by Science Research Associates. The first round of testing resulted in 1,300 students being designated for retention in grade after the academic year ending in June 1974. This number constituted nearly one-third of the entire Greensville County school population. Not the least reason for the predictable uproar which ensued was the fact that no fewer than 1,000 of the affected students had been bringing home satisfactory report

cards. Without going into all of the details (which, of course, do make an interesting case study), let me simply report that Superintendent Owen eventually gathered enough public support to make his new testing program stick, thanks mainly--we are told--to the help of a black parent on the Greensville school board who agreed that his own son would not be well-served by having the schools pass him along despite a lack of achievement.

According to the latest progress report of which I am aware, the Greensville County averages on Virginia state achievement tests have risen more than 20 percent, and Greensville schools have moved up from the bottom one-third to the top one-half in the rankings on national achievement tests. The number of students rated one year or more below grade level has declined from 1,300 in academic year 1973-74 to only 276 in 1977-78. Another reported index of success is that the Greensville County drop-out rate from the public schools has gone from 12 percent to 7.5 percent over the same period. And it is probably not incidental that college-going among graduating seniors has risen from 45 percent to 89 percent.

The national press has reported heartening news from other quarters too. For example, Denver, Colorado has had an MCT program since 1959. Over the years, the number of students failing to attain the designated standards of competence has dropped from 15 percent in 1959 to merely 1.5 percent in 1976. (During the same time, Denver SAT scores remained stable.) There have been encouraging press reports from Gary, Indiana, where school officials claim good results from public school remediation programs. Recently, only six of 2,500 seniors did not graduate on schedule, and of those six, five enrolled in additional courses over the following summer in order to come up to standards. The Gary program has been applauded by teachers, parents, and local employers alike.

James Popham, writing in Educational Leadership last fall (23), reported one more example of good work in progress. This time, in Detroit, Michigan. With the explicit intention of using MCT programs to improve the school system's instructional program, Detroit is developing high school proficiency examinations in reading, writing, and mathematics. Tests in these three subjects eventually are to be the core of a more comprehensive MCT program.

One extremely important characteristic of all these case histories is that they are working in places with large minority populations, indicating that MCT has the support of minority parents and teachers when it is properly employed: "To detect and diagnose," as Jesse Jackson has said with his typical alliterative flair, "not to delete and destroy."

Vernon Jordan of the National Urban League articulated the demands of all parents when he said last summer:

> Testing can be a useful tool to measure a student's mastery over subject matter. The purpose of a test shouldn't be to label the student; it should be a teaching guide to help instructors meet the individual needs of their students.

Thus, competency tests introduced in early grades have their place when used as tools to help teachers who believe in their pupils' potentials to improve the education given children. Such tests are positive teaching tools, not mechanisms to label kids as failures or to track them into paths of failure and push them out of school.

Such tests should be within the context of intense parental involvement, in which the rights and responsibilities of parents are encouraged by school systems. Parents have the responsibility to encourage success in school, to instill in their children respect for school and the desire to learn, and to constantly encourage their children with high expectations.

They also have rights too often ignored by schools. Parents have the right to regular assessment of their children's performance, the right to expect their children to get instruction that maximizes their capabilities and remedies their weaknesses, and the right to hold schools accountable for educating their youngsters.

Jesse McCrary, Florida's secretary of state and the first black to hold cabinet office in that state, has rejected the notion that racial bias accounts for the poor showing of black students on the statewide minimum-competency tests. "The system didn't teach the children--period," he said. "Whether these children were black or white, they weren't taught." McCrary has been chairman of the governor's committee to study the state's testing program. At one of the public hearings his committee held, a retired teacher who now works in Fort Lauderdale's black community exclaimed, "For God's sake, do not do away with the test. I want that diploma to mean something."

The Potential of MCT

It is true that tests may be used to create new obstacles for minority students, but such abuse is not inevitable. In the classroom, minimum-competency tests can be used as part of an early-warning system to identify students who are not learning and who should become the target of immediate efforts to use other teaching approaches or to provide other appropriate forms of remediation. Thus, MCT can be helpful for recognizing individual needs. Nor can we ignore the usefulness of minimum-competency tests for increasing a student's sense of responsibility. The knowledge that there is a public, explicitly defined consensus about standards can help to stimulate greater interest in achievement, especially among older children.

Schools are helped by MCT programs that induce intensive self-examination by education professionals, school boards, and the public. The test can lead to reemphasis on the importance of basic skills. MCT can help to put a stop to social promotion, and it can help to furnish adequate information to the public about teaching and learning in the schools. Parents, in particular, need better information about their children's achievement and about their children's schools. MCT can lead to greater parental participation in the life of the schools by creating a needed dialogue, as when parents, teachers, and

principals--and in some cases students--work jointly to define minimum-competency standards and to set explicit achievement goals for the instructional program. Ultimately, MCT promises to help the nation reduce the appalling incidence of functional illiteracy. It can help to restore the meaning of the high school diploma and to rebuild crumbling confidence in the public schools.

One major reason for being sanguine about the potential of MCT to help improve the education of minority children is that its fundamental premise calls for the measurement of learning outcomes. This approach departs sharply from some initiatives of the recent past, which have been predicated on spending new money for new programs rather than on striving for specified learning outcomes. Last October, at the AERA topical conference on minimum-competency achievement testing in Washington, D.C. Jenne Britell (5) explained why she believes that the call for minimum-competency standards represent what she calls "a new stage in American education." First, she said, minimum competence is a more egalitarian standard than any other ever employed in the public schools. Its advocates are searching for a way to reconcile the fact of differences among individuals with the political demand for equality of achievement, after more than a decade of searching for equality of opportunity. Second, she went on, minimum competence may be the only truly achievable educational goal we can set, given differences among students and the limits of resources and instructional know-how. Third, minimum-competency standards constitute a universal guarantee of a kind never before asked of the public schools: a pledge that no child shall leave school as a functional illiterate. That, in the last analysis, is why minorities can and do rally to the MCT movement.

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